IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

Volume 48 | Number 3 | May 2017

AFRICA'S YOUTH EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGE: NEW PERSPECTIVES

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Navigating Precarious Employment: Social Networks Among Migrant Youth in Ghana*

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Abstract This article is concerned with the precarious employment situations of migrant youth and the supportive role of social networks. It draws on interviews conducted with 30 young migrants in Accra, Ghana. The empirical findings reveal that the precarious nature of young people's employment manifests in the uncertain nature of work, exploitation by clients and employers, as well as low and irregular income. These lead to socioeconomic hardships such as not being able to meet basic needs. The article further demonstrates how social networks strengthen young migrants' agency through the provision of financial resources that allow them to navigate hardships. However, exploitative practices are also inherent within these networks and this article exposes these, alongside the demonstrable benefits. Provision of financial support for rural young people to further their education, enforcement of laws within the informal sector and support for migrants' networks would help improve the situation.

Keywords: Africa, migration, informal sector, head porters, inequality, social injustice, economic survival.

1 Introduction

A decade and a half of economic growth across Africa, including Ghana, gave birth to the 'Africa rising' narrative (Obeng-Odoom 2015). Ghana has been lauded as something of a model. With almost two decades of consolidated democratic institutions and economic growth over 6 per cent, the country appears to have avoided many of the pitfalls of macroeconomic mismanagement afflicting other countries on the continent (Rexer 2015).

The irony is that while Ghana has experienced high growth rates, the creation of new formal sector jobs has not matched the number of new entrants to the labour market (AfDB 2014). Evidently, labour-intensive manufactured exports – the driving force behind economic transformation and employment creation in East Asian countries – is far from taking off in Ghana (Filmer and Fox 2014). This phenomenon

The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK
This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 48 No. 3 May 2017: **'Africa's Youth Employment Challenge: New Perspectives'**; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

of jobless growth has combined with globalisation, economic restructuring and transformation of labour markets in reducing employment opportunities for young people. Shrinking public and private sectors have limited the possibility for young people to secure wage employment (Langevang and Gough 2012). In 2010, official unemployment of young people aged 15–24 years was estimated to average 12 per cent, ranging from 18.1 per cent in Greater Accra to 5.8 per cent in the Northern Region (Osei-Assibey and Grey 2013). However, these figures may underestimate the magnitude of unemployment as they fail to capture the widespread nature of underemployment (Hino and Ranis 2013). A recent report by the World Bank (2016) dubbed *Landscape of Jobs in Ghana* suggested that 48 per cent of all young people aged 15–24 years are jobless.

Many young people find themselves in informal sector jobs, which is estimated to encompass approximately 90 per cent of the labour force (Baah-Boateng 2013). While statistics on the participation of different social groups in the informal sector are hard to come by, anecdotal evidence suggests that young people from Ghana's northern regions may be over-represented. Their movement to southern cities to participate in the booming informal sector is motivated by hopes of accessing jobs, earning income and increasing social mobility. These young migrants have few skills and are involved mainly in low-skill, easy-entry activities such as mechanical repairs, shoe mending, hairdressing, truck pushing, commercial payphone services, dressmaking, barbering, running errands, shop assistant work, photography, food preparation and sales, and repair works including garment, watch and clock repairs, as well as hawking and head portering (Gough, Langevang and Owusu 2013; Heintz and Pickbourn 2012). Their working days are marked by longer working hours, irregular income, insecurity and lack of written contracts (Yeboah *et al.* 2015). Youth researchers are now concerned with exploring young people's tactical and navigation strategies in negotiating multiple forms of transitions towards respectable social positions (Ng *et al.* 2016). For example, Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell's (2015) work on young people in a precarious labour market in the UK revealed that experience and exposure to desirable occupations were important for transition to imagined future jobs. In her ethnographic account of young people's desire for social mobility and respectable adulthood in Madagascar, Cole (2011) reports entry into the sexual economy as a tactic employed by young women, although on the surface, this might appear to be a sharp break with traditional values and norms. While these studies give insight into how young people negotiate multiple forms of transitions, the ways in which social networks facilitate young people's entry into the labour market and help strengthen their agency in navigating socioeconomic hardship has received little research attention.

This article focuses attention on the precarious employment situation of young migrants working in the urban informal economy and the supportive role of networks. It draws on data from qualitative interviews conducted with 30 young migrants (aged 13–24 years) in Accra,

Ghana. The aim is to contribute to the literature by contextualising young migrants' employment situation within the social network and social capital literatures. This contextualisation helps us to situate the everyday employment struggles of young migrants. Policymakers could draw on the article's insights to: (1) learn more about young migrants' employment situation and the forms of social networks utilised, and (2) develop specific strategies to harness these social networks to reach migrant youth and support employment interventions.

The article starts by discussing the concepts of social capital and networks and their relevance in relation to young people's social mobility. Section 3 then provides a description of the research site and the overall methodology. Section 4 discusses the findings, focusing on the background of study participants, motivations for moving, pathways for entry into the labour market, precariousness of employment situation and supportive role of networks. Finally, Section 5 offers concluding remarks with some policy suggestions.

2 Social capital, networks and youth social mobility

The concept of social capital is well established in social science. It is rooted in the nineteenth-century classical social science of Durkheim, Marx, Togueville and Weber (Woolcock 2010). In practice, it is linked to material and symbolic relations of exchange (Bourdieu 1983). While the concept is complex and has varied meanings, this article employs the definition put forward by Bourdieu as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (1983: 249).

Existing research has paid little attention to the ways that young migrants 'socialise in friendship networks… and generate their own connections for mutual benefit' (Edwards, Franklin and Holland 2003: 12). Youth researchers note that the fact that migrants of all ages are part of kinship and ethnicity networks obliterates the sense of social rupture espoused in sedentarist thoughts (Thorsen 2013). The scant scholarly attention given to young migrants' interaction with their networks is partly because the anthropological gaze moved away from structures, instead privileging practices and discourses (*ibid.*). It is partly also because trafficking and child rights dominated and framed the earlier debates about young people's spatial mobility. Even though the trafficking discourse has begun to recognise young people's migration as inexorable and legitimate, the ways in which young people utilise their networks to navigate precarious employment situations figure only marginally (*ibid.*). By using social networks as an analytic optic, we can better understand the ways in which young migrants draw on their multi-sited social contacts as a resource in the face of adversity.

Two main forms of social capital have been identified: bonding and bridging. The former occurs within groups while the latter is evident across groups. Bonding capital is when people have ties to others who

share common characteristics, including family members, close friends, neighbours and colleagues within the work place. Bridging capital on the other hand is primarily instrumental, links across groups, and generates a more varied flow of resources for advancing aspirations, hopes and expectations (Jørgensen 2016). This distinction matters because 'reciprocity exchanges' within groups of high bonding social capital may be facilitated or constrained by the totality of resources possessed by members within the group (Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi 2015).

Allen (2009) has argued that bonding social capital can offer young people an initial entry into the labour market, for example through employment in co-ethnic firms. Even though bonding networks may be limited to members of the same family or ethnic group, young people who are privileged to have such ties may be more likely to find jobs than those without. Bonding capital provides physical or emotional support in times of crisis and upholds identity and status. Nonetheless, bonding social capital and networks may also curtail opportunities for young people to access wider and more diverse networks beyond family, locality or ethnic group. De la Haye *et al.* (2012) and MacDonald and Shildrick (2007) analysed social networks among disadvantaged youth and discovered that bridging networks provided the support needed for economic survival, while those with bonding capital did not have access to the diversity of resources needed for realising employment aspirations. Flow of information within the bonding networks encouraged and supported criminal activities which suggest further marginalisation. Engagement in criminal activities including, for example, pilfering saleable items from garden sheds, motorbikes, cars and garages, emerged as street-based leisure activities in response to tedious days created by persistent school absence (MacDonald and Shildrick 2007). In Ghana, relatively younger migrants residing in slum areas may be more likely to join gangs and get involved in risky behaviour, sexual exploitation, pilfering and gambling.

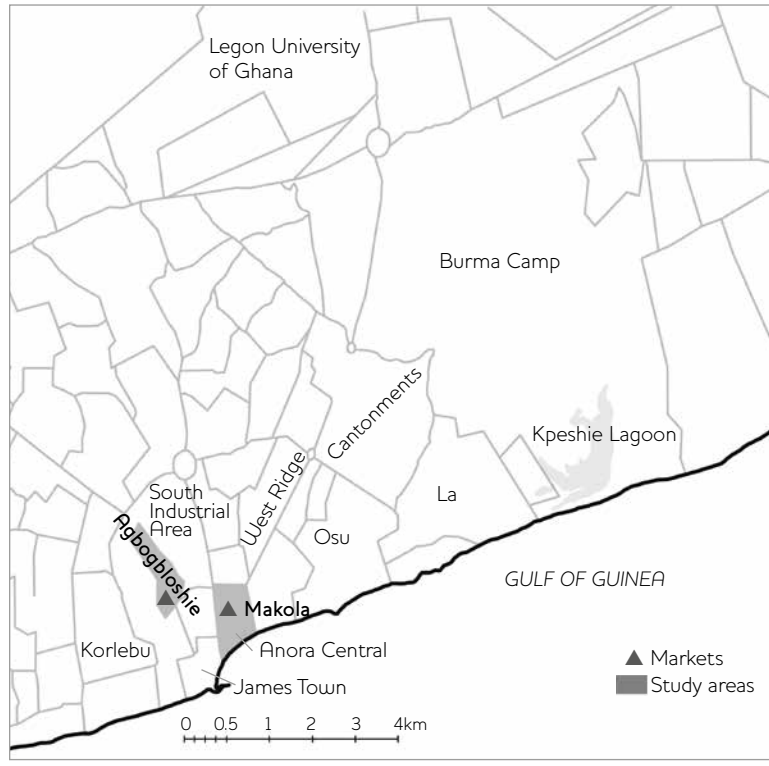
Lancee (2012) asserted that there is the possibility for young people to diversify their networks over time, and in this way, bonding capital will become gradually supplemented by bridging networks. Bridging networks create broader identities and reciprocity and are required to 'get ahead' (Putnam 2000: 21–3). Granovetter (1973) equates bridging networks with weak ties. Such ties serve as bridges to other networks and are essential to a person's integration in a new society. Young people with bridging networks may be able to access a wide range of informational resources connected with job placement through, for example, the diversity of people that may be part of the networks. In contrast, individuals with few bridging networks 'will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends' (Granovetter 1973: 202). Bridging networks may therefore foster stronger connections across social divisions, thereby strengthening the collective ability of young people to undertake coordinated actions for a common goal. And this may further help facilitate vertical labour market mobility. Research

has found that conflict prevention between Muslim and Hindu groups in India hinges on the presence of bridging networks (civic organisation membership that cut across religious lines, for example sports groups and local business organisations of which Muslims and Hindus are equally represented) (Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi 2015).

In addition to bonding and bridging, a third type of social capital – linking capital – has been noted. This is concerned with ties to people in positions of authority – these links are essentially vertical, to people in key economic institutions, or who may provide access to political and other resources (Woolcock 2010). Someone with ties to people of higher socioeconomic status may be more likely to access employment avenues that are filled through word-of-mouth. Young people with secondary and tertiary education in Ghana complained that the 'school certificate takes you nowhere' (Langevang and Gough 2009: 745) because of lack of linking social networks that could connect them to employment in formal sector jobs. Linking capital may thus provide support that bonding and bridging networks may be unwilling or unable to offer to young people. In a study of how runaway and homeless youth navigate difficulties in transition towards adulthood, Kurtz *et al.* (2000) found that linking capital of professional social workers provided services including, for example, sending young people to hospital for treatment, counselling and shelter. Professionals assisted the young people in developing communication and anger management skills, in meeting basic needs and the provision of structures and positive activities, and helped them to plan for their futures. The homeless and runaway youth also learned how to manage feelings, desist from alcohol and drug use and improve family relationships.

A social network is neither given nor granted. Significant and continuing effort is required to establish and maintain lasting and useful relationships that can help secure material or symbolic benefits. Regular acts of communication, and the resulting mutual recognition, enhance a sense of belonging (Bourdieu 1983: 192–3). However, opportunity to build, access and participate in networks may be restricted by time and resources. Even when these barriers are overcome, Anthias (2007) notes that the benefits from participation in network activities may be unequally distributed. Along these same lines, Bourdieu (1983) speaks of a more dynamic and somehow less optimistic conception of social capital as a source of inequality and social injustice, given that some groups may be more privileged in accessing valuable networks and resources than others. The usefulness of social capital surfaces from the capability of individuals to convert it into other forms of capital (e.g. economic). Such transformation may be stratified by gender, class, ethnicity and other social factors. Convertibility may thus be problematic for individuals with a low stock of economic and cultural capital, as well as for those with lower social status (Ryan, Erel and D'Angelo 2015). These challenges may hinder the conversion of valuable social capital to economic capital and can hinder young people's access to formal and informal sector jobs, wealth accumulation and social mobility.

Figure 1 **Map of the Accra Metropolitan Area showing Agbogbloshie market**



Source Redrawn from Wrigley-Asante (2013, Figure 2), reprinted by permission of the publisher Taylor & Francis Ltd, www.tandfonline.com.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research context

The research was conducted at the Agbogbloshie market in Accra (see Figure 1). The entire population of Agbogbloshie is estimated to be about 15,000 (Obeng-Odoom 2014), comprising mainly economic migrants from northern and other rural parts of Ghana. They live, work, eat and do almost everything in the market and surrounding area. Many of them sleep in wooden structures, uncompleted buildings, open spaces and lorry parks. Living conditions are unhygienic, and migrants have limited access to bathrooms, kitchens and sanitary facilities.

3.2 Methods

The empirical material for this article comes from a larger project investigating the ways in which young people actively shape, negotiate and challenge their social worlds through rural to urban migration. The study was conducted between December 2015 and August 2016. The total body of empirical material for the project included 42 individual interviews; three focus group discussions with young migrants; field observations and participatory activities (drawings and photo elicitation); policy-level interviews; and a questionnaire-based survey with heads of migrant households in Wungu, a poor rural community within West Mumprusi District of northern Ghana. This article draws

specifically on 30 individual interviews with the young migrants to illustrate their precarious employment situations and the supportive role of social networks.

The data collection exercise started with young migrants who are beneficiaries of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called the Kayayei Youth Association (KYA). KYA is an association of young female migrants who work as head porters in the Central Business District of Accra. The snowballing sampling technique was employed to reach migrants who did not benefit from KYA programmes. This offered more scope to cover the diversity of young migrants in the urban informal economy. With prior permission, participants' interviews were recorded using a digital recorder device. These were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the thematic coding and analysis technique. The analysis also relied on narrative data from diverse sources which provided a framework for comparison of perspectives and triangulation of findings across sources.

4 Findings

4.1 Background and motivation for migrating

The 30 young people (18 females and 12 males) whose accounts are reported in this article are migrants from several rural parts of northern Ghana including Bimbila, Gushegu, Savelugu, Namumba South, Yendi, Karaga, Nakpali and Tamale. Their ages range from 13 to 25 years. The young migrants belong to large families ranging from three to 15 siblings. The data suggest that all of them are from poor rural socioeconomic backgrounds with parents engaged in low-income occupations including small-scale farming and petty trading. With large families and limited income, it was difficult for parents to meet the young migrants' educational and economic needs: 13 never had any formal schooling; five were junior high school (JHS) graduates or dropouts respectively; while the remaining seven were senior high school (SHS) graduates. Similar to findings reported by Langevang (2008), the young migrants bemoaned the fact that their families had failed to provide them with the resources needed to further their education or start-up capital to establish their own ventures:

> *If I get the sewing machine and money to sew I wouldn't have come here. My parents don't have money to buy it for me. I am here to make money*. (Ishak, 20-year-old female, from Yendi)

A clear gender difference in educational history is evident. Except for two females who had completed JHS, all the females were either dropouts from school or had not been to school at all. On the other hand, all the seven SHS graduates were males. Gender differences in the educational outcomes of the young migrants is attributed to the socialisation processes and culture in much of rural northern Ghana. Largely confined to the domestic sphere, young women are viewed as temporary members of the household since they will invariably marry and move to their husbands' village (Hashim and Thorsen 2011). The preference of sons over daughters makes education a privilege for males and not females:

Table 1 **Distribution of participants by type of work**

Type of work	Number
Head portering (*kayayei*)	18
Construction work	5
Scrap dealer	2
Driver, driver's mate, bus station worker	2
Photographer	1
Repairer	1
Multiple jobs	1
Total	**30**

Source Fieldwork 2016.

> *I have never been to school before. I was staying with my mum and dad but my father said we are many so I should stop schooling and join them in the farm so that my brothers rather go to school*. (Anasa, 15-year-old female, from Tamale)

Understanding young people's motivation to migrate is crucial for analysing and contextualising their lived experiences. Many of them (19) were motivated by the need to work, earn income and either restart or further their education, or establish a business:

> *I came here last year, my aim is to be able to establish my own business, so I came to look for money to establish my business back home.… If today I get 15 million as we speak I will go home but I am still planning towards it*. (Mariam, 18-year-old female, from Tamale)

> *I came here to make money to continue school because I gained admission to Walensi SHS. I made part payment but the school authorities did not accept that. If they had accepted I would have been a candidate by this year*. (Amaalu, 22-year-old male, from Bimbila)

The remaining 11 who are all females were interested in using migration to enter the world of work, in preparation for marriage. As key players in the domestic sphere, the young females are socialised to accept responsibility as the sole providers of household items such as basins and pots before marriage (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008). But their confinement to the domestic sphere where their labour is not remunerated makes it difficult if not impossible to procure these items. Migration in search of paid employment is the only viable option.

4.2 Sectors of employment and pathways to entry

Given their limited education and skills, the informal sector provides the only plausible avenue for these young migrants. The types of work they were engaged in at the time of the interviews are shown in Table 1.

Engagement in particular types of work is highly gendered: all of the 18 who reported doing head portering (*kayayei*) were females. Other researchers have suggested that while the young male migrants do multiple jobs, females are confined to head portering (Awumbila and Ardayfio-Schandorf 2008; Yeboah *et al.* 2015). Engagement in multiple jobs by one male migrant is to ensure higher daily wages and insure against any non-payment by his employers. Thorsen (2013) suggested that this was also a way to develop new skills and broaden work experience.

As Allen (2009) has suggested, bonding social networks can help migrants' entry into the labour market, and the young migrants interviewed in Accra also emphasised the importance of networks for their entry into the informal sector. For example, the only requirement for starting work in *kayayei* is a head pan which costs on average GH¢30. The rest is about being physically fit. However, in order to overcome their limited finances, young females relied on families and friends for the money to secure a new pan, or the loan of an old pan: 'My sister assisted me to get head pan to start work. She gave me GH¢30 to buy the pan' (Alima, 16 years old, from Tamale).

The supportive role of networks in facilitating young migrants' transition to the labour market is consistent with Awumbila, Owusu and Teye (2014) who report that rural–urban migrants in Ghana mostly receive financial support and information about jobs in the destinations through social networks. Further, the initiation into the informal labour market via social relations is central to the creation of occupational niches. In Accra, most *kayayei* are from the Mumprusi and Dagomba ethnic groups, while almost all itinerant shoe-shiners in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) are of Bisa ethnicity (Thorsen 2014). However, there is a downside to this: for example, growing competition and market saturation in the *kayayei* business as a result of supportive social networks may reduce earning potential (*ibid.*).

Eight young female migrants demonstrated their agency through traversing and negotiating the structural constraints that might have hampered their migration and entry into the labour market. For example, Anasa, a 15-year-old from Tamale, said: 'I do *kayayei*. I came with money, I harvested groundnut to raise the money for my movement and head pan'. Thus, in contrast to the image of a passive or powerless actor, Anasa planned ahead and acted to make her migration successful.

Other jobs such as construction, scrap dealing and driving require no financial resources. Rather, social connections are critical: 'I do construction work with one Chinese firm. My friends assisted me to get that job' (Alhamo, 24-year-old male from Bimbila). Mahamadu describes how he combined schooling and work and this allowed him to develop skills as a mason, which became useful when he migrated to Accra after linking up with his friends:

> *I was learning mason after my JHS but I continued my education. Shortly after when my results came, I communicated with my friends in Accra who told me that I could use that skill to make a living in Accra. When I arrive in Accra I told them I was looking for a job, they took me to a construction company at Tema station and then they took me*. (Mahamadu, 22-year-old male, from Yendi)

4.3 Young migrants' precarious employment situations

The work of the young migrants is characterised by complex interlocking difficulties. Findings on the precariousness of young migrant employment centred on uncertainty and exploitation by clients and employers manifested through lowering or non-payment of wages, all of which affect earning potential. This further results in an inability to meet daily consumption, accommodation and health needs. However, these experiences differed by gender and type of work.

The young migrants spoke of how every day they remained uncertain as to whether their services would be required. For the males who are engaged in construction for example, the possibility of going to work depended on whether their services would be required by their employers:

> *As for you being called to work, it depends. Sometimes my master will call me to come, other times he will not. When there is more work then you are sure that you will be called*. (Mahamadu, 22-year-old male, from Yendi)

Female head porters experience uncertainty differently:

> *I wake up around 4am and goes straight to yam market. By this time the lorry from north will have arrived to offload yam. I go there to see if I will get some load to carry. Sometimes you will get something to carry. Other times, nothing. From there I go to the Makola market to see if I will get load. During the day, it is all about walking and walking. If you are lucky you will get every load, if you are not, you won't get anything to carry. I take break in the afternoon with my friends under a tree. We talk about our lives and how we can make it here and play. By 4pm I return to the market to look for some load to carry*. (Asanafi, 13-year-old female, from Gushegu)

There is no assurance that her services will be required, and 'walking and walking' looking for something to carry inevitably leads to fatigue and stress. The possibility of getting a load to carry, which Asanafi argued depends heavily on luck, was keenly discussed by the other females interviewed. A few of the female head porters had developed connections with owners of larger shops or supermarkets, which provide some greater stability. Although Asanafi alludes to taking breaks in the afternoons and engaging in conversation and play with her friends when tired, for these young women, navigation of the cityscape in search of work is done individually.

Interview data reveal that the income that the young migrants earn in a day ranges from GH¢3 to about GH¢26 (US$0.21 to US$5.47), depending on the kind of job. Some, however, said that there were days

when they earned nothing. Susceptibility to low or irregular earnings is linked to factors such as the fortunes of the market, attitude of employers and clients, gender and power relations, as well as lack of written work contracts or standards:

> *I sometimes carry people stuff but they refuse to pay. They see me to be young*. (Memu, 16-year-old female, from Tamale)

> *Initially it was difficult to get work or load to carry when I first came to Accra but now it is quite okay. The payment for our services is irregular. People don't treat us fairly. They pay any amount they want. Sometimes you can earn nothing*. (Mariam, 18-year-old female, from Tamale)

The accounts of Memu and Mariam raises several issues. Firstly, because female head porters can be desperate to get something to carry, they may fail to agree a price with their clients beforehand. The lack of any guidance on amount to be paid allows customers to offer amounts that are not commensurate with the weight of the load or the distance covered. The latter part of Mariam's account further suggests that the lower income earnings of females are also enforced by issues of power relations and patriarchy embedded in the fabric of the local culture. The patriarchal structures dominant in Ghana often paint a picture of the ideal woman or girl as submissive, respectful and tractable. Thus, any articulation of dissatisfaction and expression of displeasure in their own language can be construed as an insult, resulting in reproach, intimidation and physical abuse:

> *I once carried the items of one man from Agbogbloshie to Tema station. When we got to the station he did not give me any money. When I asked him why in my own language, he started to insult and beat me*. (Alima, 16-year-old female, from Tamale)

Those who had been employed by companies had similar experiences. Some employers particularly in the construction sector fail to pay the wages of the migrants. Alhamo narrates how his employers – a Chinese construction firm – failed to pay the agreed monthly wage to him and his colleagues:

> *They normally pay us on monthly for the work through a time card. Just last month they misplaced my time card so they said they can't pay me about GH¢300, about five of us. There was nothing I could do. My problem now is getting new job*. (Alhamo, 24-year-old male, from Bimbila)

Alhamo's experience is widespread among many informal sector workers in Ghana. This resonates with the findings of Thorsen (2013) in Burkina Faso, when she reports that employers, particularly in the food sector, deliberately introduce wage cuts or fail to pay young migrants when business slackens or when the young employees break or waste something. In addition to a sense of abuse and injustice, this kind of behaviour leads to socioeconomic hardship, including inability to meet daily subsistence needs and the symbolic culture of sending remittances home.

4.4 Social networks and navigation in times of economic hardship

The young migrants do not accept the situation passively but navigate it as best they can by drawing on their social connections. The role of social networks in young migrants' navigation of economic hardship manifested largely through the provision of financial resources in meeting basic needs (e.g. food, shelter, water and accommodation), encouragement and emotional support for those who encounter non-payment or lowering of wages by clients or employers. Young migrants' networks also enabled them to save part of their earnings. However, exploitative behaviours including, for example, pilfering and inability to retrieve savings from network leaders, were inherent within these networking ties.

Ethnic-specific bonding networks are thought to provide not only information about jobs and services, but also to help migrants to get by through the provision of financial, emotional and moral support (Sime and Fox 2015). Similarly, the young migrants interviewed spoke of how networks of families and friends from the same community or ethnic group are instrumental in providing financial support to meet basic needs:

> *We have a group whom sleep together. So, when I don't have money I borrow money from my group. Sometimes they will not give you, they will tell you to go and work for money*. (Sarafina, 14-year-old female from Gushegu)

Most of them are full of praise for friends and family members for the financial help they provide. Some (15) of the participants also mentioned receiving encouragement and advice from their friends and family members not to give up when wages are not paid by clients or employers. The latter part of Sarafina's account, however, highlights the fact that support from social networks is not guaranteed. Very young migrants (less than 15 years old) may receive few benefits from these networks, and they do not necessarily provide them with support or protection. For example, it is common for young migrants to rent a single room, splitting the cost between them equally. While this reduces the cost of accommodation, it can have unintended negative consequences, including fighting and theft: 'My phone was stolen last week. I don't know who did but I suspect someone whom I sleep with at the mosque' (Alidu, 20-year-old male from Wungu).

The young migrants also spoke of involvement in savings groups. Each ethnic group has their own savings model, making them exclusionary. The groups are mediated by relatively respected older people who the young migrants could identify with and who are from their home town. Participation in such a savings model is said to be voluntary and out of free will; there is no set amount one must contribute. The principle is that the individual will request the savings to be returned at the end of the month. Nonetheless, in the event of circumstances such as lack of payment by clients or employees, the young migrants draw on such savings to meet subsistence needs: 'We have a *susu* [savings] group where I save some of my money. When I do not have money, I go to our leader to get some of my money' (Anasa, 15-year-old female, from Tamale).

Awumbila, Teye and Yaro (2016) have argued that under certain circumstances participation in social network activities may be a site for exploitation of young migrants. Consistent with this is an account of misunderstanding and tension among members in one savings group:

> *I was saving my money with our group but there was misunderstanding. The leader was one woman from the north who was keeping the monies. The woman was not staying with us in our room. One girl requested for her money, and the woman gave it to her. Other girl requested for her money and there was misunderstanding because the woman was not happy. I requested for my money and did not get. Since then I have not set my eyes on the woman again. I saved about GH¢50 but I did not get.* (Faati, 20-year-old female, from Tamale)

5 Conclusion and policy implications

Young migrants' transitions into the labour market demonstrates the important role that their networks can play in providing the finance necessary for travel and to secure work. Their precarious employment situation involves considerable uncertainty and risk, and exploitation by employers and clients. Incomes are low and irregular, which brings additional difficulties in fulfilling daily subsistence needs. Some of these difficulties are mitigated through social networks. These networks are therefore fundamental in the life trajectories of young migrants, right from the time the decision to migrate is taken (see also Awumbila *et al.* 2016). However, they are also associated with discrimination and exploitative practices.

The empirical findings have implications for both research and policy. Future research could focus on young migrants' utilisation of linking social capital and the extent to which it supports their life trajectories. In relation to policy, there is the need for supportive systems that can provide an enabling environment for young people to realise their aspirations around education with the aim to gain decent employment in the formal sector. While schooling in Ghana is in theory free from primary to junior high school, there are school-related expenses which parents must pay. Moreover, at the senior high school level, fees become payable. While the fees vary between schools depending on the perceived status and desirability of the school and its nature (day-school or boarding school), they can be prohibitive for parents in rural northern Ghana whose livelihoods are dependent on rain-fed agriculture. One way to address this is to provide direct support to poor families for children's education: just as there is a youth employment fund, government could set up a school development fund for young people from poorer rural backgrounds to further their education.

Deliberate action is also needed by the state to better protect informal sector workers from exploitation by clients and employers. While laws such as the Labour Act (2003) are supposed to protect the rights of all workers (including migrants), they are only enforced in the formal sector (Awumbila *et al.* 2016). Thus, the vast majority of workers, who are, after all, within the informal economy, receive no protection.

The operations of Ghanaian institutions such as the National Labour Commission, the Department of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations as well as the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection must now be strengthened and expanded to cover the informal sector.

Lastly, there is an opportunity for government bodies and NGOs to work much more closely with migrants' networks to better provide for the health, safety, education and wellbeing of young migrants.

Note

* This work was supported by the Smuts Memorial Fund, managed by the University of Cambridge in memory of Jan Christiaan Smuts.

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